ATTITUDES, COMMUNICATION AND OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY: OVERCOMING ATTITUDES TOWARD DISABLED EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

Negative attitudes towards social or ethnic groups often act as a barrier to communications. Such barriers are of particular concern in the workplace as they can interfere with safety and job performance. This paper reviews the various attitudinal barriers (intellectual, emotional, and behavioural) which may result in social isolation of disabled employees by others in the workplace. How such isolation may influence job performance and workplace safety are discussed and methods for overcoming the various social barriers are presented.

ATTITUDES TOWARD DISABLED EMPLOYEES

Distinguishing a Disability from a Handicap

A disability may be defined as a condition of impairment, physical or mental, having an objective aspect that can usually be described by a physician. A handicap includes the limitations that are outside the physical disability, such as barriers imposed by the physical and social environment (Hamilton, 1950). For example, while being left-handed is not a disability it is a handicap when all that is available for work are right-handed scissors or right-handed ladles. Thus a handicap is the cumulative result of the social and physical obstacles preventing individuals from reaching their full potential.

Social Rejection of Disabled Workers

It is said that our attitudes or reactions regarding the disabled are their greatest handicap. Attitudes toward the disabled employee can have detrimental effects upon the disabled person's work performance, as well as, general safety in the workplace.

The basic concern is the general rejection of the disabled worker. This rejection is actually a symptom of a wider based social problem. This is a problem of isolation of the disabled within society which allows for the development of negative attitudes and misconceptions.

The disabled are often perceived and treated as "deviates" i.e. separate and different from the larger society. There are a number of factors which have been used to explain this. Certainly, almost by definition, physically disabled persons are physical deviates. However, there are other social and cultural factors which operate to amplify this difference. For example, in larger technological societies, such as Canadian society, there is a tendency to group people with similar disabilities together, often in institutions which offer special care or facilities. As a result of this, disabled persons are often isolated from the rest of society. With isolation further differences can evolve between each disabled group and the general population. With increasing levels of deviation and isolation each group may also develop ever increasing misconceptions about the other groups. These misconceptions again may add to further isolation and deviation between the groups. When attempts are made to integrate members from one group into another, negative attitudes resulting from isolation, misconceptions, and real differences need to be understood and overcome.

Overcoming Barriers to Integration: A Question of Attitudes

The above process of deviance amplification may set the stage for the development of negative attitudes towards the

disabled. There are, however, social and psychological factors which may also contribute to this problem. These other contributing factors can best be understood and dealt with in terms of a more precise understanding of attitudes.

Attitudes or reactions regarding the disabled may be described as consisting of three component reactions: intellectual; emotional; and behavioural. The intellectual component consists of thoughts, ideas, assumptions, evaluations, and stereotypes that are elicited as a reaction to disabled persons. The emotional component refers to the emotions or feelings an individual experiences in relation to the disabled (e.g. fear, warmth, guilt, joy, etc.). The behavioural component refers to what individuals physically do in regards to the disabled (i.e. approach or avoid, welcome or ignore a newly hired disabled worker). Each of these components can act as a barrier to acceptance of the disabled worker. These barriers, however, can be understood and overcome.

Overcoming Intellectual Barriers

As a result of the isolation between disabled individuals and so called normal society, one problem that occurs is that "normals" often take a very simple approach to thinking about disabled individuals. Disabled individuals may be viewed as no more than labels or stereotypes. The disability may be seen as

central or key to a person's behaviour and personality and as largely responsible for the important ramifications in a person's life. This is known as "spread" (Wright, 1960). Several studies have shown that people do not hesitate to make judgements regarding a wide range of personality traits based only on the knowledge of a physical disability (Mussen, and Barker, 1944; Ray, 1946 ...cited in Navarre, 1975).

There are three devices that can be used to overcome the problem of misconceptions and over-generalization regarding disabled persons. These devices are actually three ways of developing more precise thoughts about the environment.

Indexing. The first device is known as "indexing". This is the act of remembering that things which are categorized or labeled as the same are not identical. For example, Politician "A" is not the same as Politician "B", or Paraplegic "A" is not the same as Paraplegic "B". In both examples the personality and abilities may be very different. Indexing is an important device for remembering that once persons or things are categorized together or come to share the same label, it often takes a conscious effort to recognize the differences, or the nuances that make each unique.

Dating. The second device is "dating." Dating is remembering that everything is in a constant state of change. Disabilities that once caused a person to be "helpless", may not

do so today or tomorrow. A disabled person who was known and remembered as helpless, may not be helpless today or a disabled person who may experience difficulties when first starting a job may not have these problems when settled into the job or when simple adjustments are completed.

Etcetera. The third device is called the "etcetera". This is a reminder that there are infinite complexities in the real world and that no description is ever complete; there is always more to be said. In other words, the stereotype or concepts held regarding a disabled person is not all there is to that individual. Even if these pre-conceived notions do fit an individual, there is always more to be said about the person. For example, a quadraplegic, deaf, or blind person is also a man or woman who may be an artist, a parent, a sexual being, a taxpayer, a voter, a political activist, a teller of jokes, an excellent worker etc.. The etcetera reminds us that there is always more to learn from and about the individual.

Overcoming Emotional Barriers

While intellectual acceptance of more appropriate views regarding the disabled is a start towards improving attitudes, these gains may be of little value and short lived if attention is not given to the other two components of attitudes i.e. feelings and actions. For example, it may be easy to help one logically accept that Friday the thirteenth is just another day;

but, try to get that person to undergo open heart surgery on that day!

In general, it is more difficult to change people's emotional reactions or feelings towards aspects of their environment than it is to alter their thoughts or actions. This may be particularly true of feelings towards the disabled if, as has been suggested, these negative feelings are a result of a need to perceive the world as a fair and just place and if this need is reinforced by both cultural and parental training.

From childhood, people are usually taught to look for a cause-effect relationship in everything encountered in life. We are often taught and usually like to believe that positive effects are derived from positive causes, negative effects from negative causes. This sense of justice is based upon the belief that reward and virtue are linked together as are punishment and evil. Thus, it is often felt that physical disabilities must be a result of a negative cause. In other words, disabilities and illnesses are to some extent often felt to be a form of punishment for misbehaviour. There are a number of studies which demonstrate this misconception. When subjects were shown pictures of individuals with facial anomalities they were perceived as evil (MacGregor, Able, Bryt, Lauer, and Weissmann, 1953). When subjects were shown pictures of victims of car accidents, the more severe the apparent injuries the more the victims were rated as responsible for their fate.

The need to see the world as a just place likely stems from a basic need to see the world as orderly; orderly enough to

accept that one will be rewarded for virtuous acts and punished for evil ones. Early cultural and social training likely plays a central role in maintaining and reinforcing these beliefs if not originating them. Children's stories often portray evil characters as deformed. In the Old Testament illness was considered as punishment for evil. The Bible mentions twelve blemishes that disqualify a man from being a priest, these include "a blind man or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose." (Hentig, 1948).

Parents also may reinforce the idea of illness as punishment by using illness as a threat e.g. "if you stay up late you'll get sick" or "if you go without your rubbers you'll get a cold". Even though this type of cause-effect relationship does have a basis in reality, it also teaches that sickness is a punishment for misbehaviour.

Individuals are not likely to be conscious of their need to view the world as a just and orderly place. Neither may they be conscious of the social training which helps develop this need. As this need and social training are not usually conscious, they are most likely to be expressed as negative emotion or "gut reactions" to the disabled rather than as intellectualized evaluations of their personalities.

Another factor which contributes to negative feelings towards the disabled results from the lack of exposure and social interaction between "normals" and disabled individuals. When the two are suddenly forced to interact there are bound to be feelings of anxiety based upon uncertainties regarding what is

appropriate behaviour.

The "normal" may have anxieties about interacting with a disabled employee. These anxieties may stem from previously held negative attitudes towards the disabled, as well as, from the uncertainties as to appropriate behaviour. Experiencing such anxiety may give rise to feelings of embarrassment, guilt, anger, aggression, etc.. These emotional reactions then may be linked to the source of the original anxiety, i.e. the exposure to or interaction with the disabled individual.

A first step towards improving people's feelings about the disabled is making them aware of their possible negative feelings. This means helping them to accept these negative feelings as real and understandable in terms of the personal and social factors involved. Towards this end it may be useful to refer to all or some of the factors suggested within this paper: the need to view the world as just; social and cultural training; anxiety and uncertainty regarding personal interaction; and emotional reactions to one's own anxieties regarding the disabled.

A second step in changing negative feelings would be to provide some form of continued exposure with disabled individuals. A series of concrete experiences with the disabled can help provide a basis for the reestablishment of new feelings. While exposure alone may have positive results, preparation in terms of helping both "normals" and disabled individuals deal with their emotions will help ensure success.

It should be remembered that changing people's negative

feelings towards disabled individuals usually requires time. Time to readjust personal feelings is particularly important if these emotional reactions are based upon early cultural and social training and/or a personal need to view the world as just.

Overcoming Behavioural Barriers

A central problem with the behavioural component of co-worker's attitudes (i.e. what they actually do in regards to the disabled employee) may be one of rejection or isolation of the disabled worker. This rejection and isolation may be overcome by creating situations on the job or in the workplace in which there is some degree of regular social interaction between disabled individuals and their co-workers. It must be expected, however, that overcoming rejection and isolation will occur in stages.

Davis (1953) describes three stages through which such acceptance of disabled individuals develops. At first there is a "fictional acceptance stage" in which there is a superficial, strained, and limited type of interaction. During this stage interactions tend to be brief and about impersonal topics (e.g. talking about the weather). This "fictional acceptance" is then followed by a "breaking through stage". In this stage there is a movement to somewhat more personal topics and a redefining of ideas about one's self and the disabled individual. Finally, there is a "normalization of relationship stage" in which there is a stabilization of the relationship and the disability is

treated only as one aspect of the individual. With interaction the "normal" may literally forget the disability of the other, perhaps even leaving a paraplegic behind when running to make a green light. On the other hand, the disability may at times become part of the personal humour and general interactions between the individuals. For example, this author cannot tell left from right very quickly, however, I always remember in which hand I hold my milk, coffee or beer (my left). I also remember in which hand I hold my sandwich (my right). My wife knows that when I drive telling me to go left or right is useless, frustrating and dangerous; but, we both can chuckle and feel confident that there is no problem if she tells me to turn "milk" or "sandwich".

Consistency in Thought, Feeling and Action

The three components of attitudes (intellectual, emotional and behavioural) are not usually independent of each other in that they tend to be consistent or in harmony with each other. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that individuals become uncomfortable when they experience inconsistency between their thoughts, feelings and actions (i.e. the respective intellectual, emotional and behavioural components of attitudes) and so will seek out a means of regaining consistency. As a result, efforts to alter one or two of the components of attitudes may be thwarted by the remaining component or

components. On the other hand, a change in any one of the components, in either a positive or negative direction, will place pressure upon the other components to change in a similar direction.

Occupational Safety and Interpersonal Attitudes

The problem of negative attitudes towards groups or individuals may have far reaching effects. Such attitudes can influence both the quality of the involved person's work and the general safety of the workplace in several ways.

Expectancy Effect

If employers and co-workers expect poor and unsafe performance from certain individuals such as disabled employees, it is likely that with time, these employees will conform to the lesser standards expected of them. This is called the "expectancy effect". Conforming to the expectancies of others is a well-known phenomenon in the social sciences. For example, it has been demonstrated that performance on intelligence tests can be greatly influenced by the expectancy of others. If adults expect children to perform poorly on such tests this will often result in lowered performance scores (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968).

Disabled as "Deviate"

Some employees may find themselves in the role of "deviate" in that co-workers may either be unwilling to interact with them or interact in only a strained, limited or superficial manner. Employees may find themselves in this "deviate" role as a result of any number of social, ethnic or personal characteristics. Disabled individuals often are faced with this situation (Davis, 1953).

The potential impact of work group relationships upon accidents has been demonstrated. One study that investigated this relationship used a technique for exploring social interactions within a group whereby each member of the group privately indicated which of the other workers were his or her friends" (Ancelin-Schutzenberger, 1961 ... cited in Surry, 1969). It was found that men who were least popular had the highest accident rates. One reason for this may be that an unpopular individual is not kept fully informed by co-workers regarding changes in dangerous conditions. Physical disabilities of workers may contribute to this problem, especially if the employee is perceived as less attractive or less similar to co-workers in either background or personal problems as a result of the disability. There is evidence that people are more likely to offer help to those they perceive as more physically attractive (Benson, Karabenick & Lerner, 1976) or more similar to themselves in background or fate (Feldman, 1968; West, 1975).

Impact of Rejection

A third threat to safety in the workplace is derived from the possible preoccupation with social rejection and/or the stress resulting from social isolation. Such pre-occupation or stress of the disabled individual could interfere with the recognition of danger, alter the degree of on- and off-the-job risk taking, or even reduce one's physical ability to avoid a dangerous situation (Surry, 1969).

SUMMARY

Negative attitudes towards individuals, social, or ethnic groups often act as a barrier to communications. Such barriers are of particular concern in the workplace as they may interfere with safety and job performance. For example, in the case of disabled individuals, negative attitudes can result in the isolation of the disabled within society and misconceptions about them. Employers and co-workers' misconceptions and rejection of disabled workers may have a number of detrimental effects upon their work performance, as well as, general safety in the workplace. Both performance and safety standards will suffer if less is expected of any worker or such workers are rejected and socially isolated.

A wide range of personal, social, and cultural factors may lead to negative attitudes towards various individuals or social groups. The negative attitudes, however, may be overcome within the workplace, even though they may represent a broader social problem of isolation and rejection. The first step in overcoming this problem would be to help employers and co-workers understand their own reactions or attitudes (intellectual, emotional, and behavioural) towards the disliked individuals or group. After an awareness of the causes for negative attitudes have been established, exposure to, and social contact with socially isolated individuals, should provide all parties with the opportunity to form a new attitude of acceptance. This paper describes the process of attitude change as it relates to acceptance of the disabled within the workplace.

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